

A Theological Background to the Admission of All the Baptised to Communion

The full texts of the Doctrinal Commission's papers on Communion, Baptism and Confirmation can be downloaded from the Church in Wales website. The following text is based upon the address to Governing Body by a member of the Commission at the Presentation of the Report.

Is baptism the complete rite of Christian initiation?

Yes. Baptism is the full rite of Christian initiation. It is a sacrament, commanded by Christ, and is the sole rite of entry into his Church. It is all that is necessary in scripture, and like all sacraments in the Anglican tradition is the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. Our liturgies and statements of faith affirm that it is baptism that gives the church its shape and identity. We describe ourselves as the community of the baptised, rather than the community of the confirmed, or the community of the theologically educated, or the religiously proficient or morally superior.

This is vital to how we see ourselves. It stresses that we are who we are not by any action or merit or quality of our own but by the grace of God through the work of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit.

In affirming baptism as the sole and full rite of entry to the body of Christ we are expressing that it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us and that we did not choose him, he chose us.

This is not to say that a response to God's grace isn't called for, or that deepening our understanding of our faith isn't a really good thing. Just that these are not the first or primary things. The primary thing is the love and grace of God which meets us while we were still far off. It is this that assures us of our place within and as part of the body of Christ.

If the body of Christ is what we are through baptism, it seems natural that the Body of Christ might also be that which we receive as the baptised.

Therefore - Are there any reasons to deny communion to the baptised?

No. Any obstacle that you might place in between the two gospel sacraments of baptism and communion risks making that thing seem more important, more powerful, than the grace of God.

For example, if we demand that a certain level of understanding is required before communion is received, not only do we need to say what that understanding is, which could be a lengthy debate, but this would also imply that communion is an intellectual exercise, something we do with our minds first.

However understanding remains important. Understanding and reflecting upon the Eucharist is of profound value and we commend that not only to confirmation candidates or 6 or 7 year olds but to the whole church as an ongoing act of devotion.

However, making understanding a criterion for reception is inappropriate. The condition of being a child does not make you unworthy, nor does it diminish the sense in which you are a member of the kingdom of God. Indeed you are first in the kingdom of God as a child. Nor does the condition of having dementia, or a

brain injury or learning difficulty, or any other reason why a person might not understand the Eucharist in a complex way make one unworthy. Rather God calls each of us to reflect upon his gift to us in a way that is appropriate to ourselves, and his gift and its benefits do not depend upon our understanding.

In the same way, if we set another standard of worthiness, none of us would reach it. Who is worthy on their own merits? Being in a position to receive worthily is not defined by whether we have been through confirmation but is to do with us being one with Christ through our baptism and is a call to humility and self examination in response.

So not only are there no barriers between the sacraments, but we also believe that there are good reasons to connect them more closely. We want to give all the newly baptised, including our children, all that we can to help them on their Christian journey. The system that we have inherited at present was appropriate for a different kind of society, where Christianity was assumed to be part of the context in which life was lived and we might expect that society to nurture and teach the faith. Now maybe what we need is a model that is focussed on mission and on sustaining discipleship under challenging conditions.

The mission of the church might be better served by returning to the ancient link between baptism and communion. This is not just about children. It helps make sense of our sharing at the altar with ecumenical friends who have not been episcopally confirmed. It helps when welcoming back people who return to church having left Sunday school in childhood and come back in later life. We can rejoice and kill the fatted calf and invite them in to the party rather than confront them with process and administration and hoops through which they need to jump before they can receive communion.

It is about those baptised or coming to faith as adults who can have much more freedom about when is the right time to be baptised, be a communicant and be confirmed.

Similarly the ability to introduce communion into fresh expressions and pioneer forms of church without having to route these new church members through a solid church gateway of confirmation might be beneficial.

However, we would also stress that enabling the freedom to receive from baptism onwards is not the same as making it compulsory.

And so finally, what then of confirmation?

The work of the Doctrine Commission illustrates well that this rite has had a whole number of meanings and has been conducted in many different ways over time. The commission was also unanimous in affirming that confirmation has a very important place in the life of the church today and should continue to do so.

As we have in baptism a sign of God's grace, so in confirmation we have the chance to respond publicly to the call that baptism places on our lives. Confirmation is a commissioning into a personally chosen stage of discipleship in response to what God has already done in us. It is also an acknowledgement that as a Christian you are part of a wider family, in fellowship with the Bishop and the whole Catholic and Apostolic church, and it is a sign that the church wishes to pray for you and to affirm you and accompany your journey of faith.

Confirmation needs, we feel, to be freed up to be this joyful expression and recognition of mature faith and commitment to discipleship, while baptism and communion together affirm the equal value of all God's people, wherever they are on that journey of faith, and our commitment to do all we can to support and feed that journey of all our members, whatever their age, sophistication or capacity.

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